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TOWARD A NEW PERSPECTIVE IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION IN LATIN AMERICA

by Hugo Ortega*

I. The Crisis in Education

Statistics on education in Latin America emphasize the failure of the school system. Illiteracy is 89.5 per cent in Haiti, 67.9 per cent in Bolivia, and 34.6 per cent in Mexico, even after sixty years of "revolution." Whereas Argentina has a rate of total illiteracy of only 8.6 per cent, the number of semi-illiterates reaches a very high proportion. By the second grade of primary, about 40 per cent of the Latin American children who enrolled in the first grade have dropped out of school.

The problem is not only illiteracy; it encompasses the global orientation of education. In 1968, the Peruvian Church, in a preparatory study for the Medellín CELAM Conference said that:

> The education presently being provided in our countries is not oriented toward the full development of the potential of the human person so that he might find a responsible place in the society in which he lives. Neither is the educational structure helping the upward movement of the lower classes so that they can lay the foundation for true national liberation.

Education at present prepares a person as though he were an investment in the educational process of the social system, ultimately favoring the state of domination and dependence which our countries suffer. The building of more schools and universities for this educational process will only prolong an unjust system.

Christian Education. Christian education--catechesis--is no different. There are just as many illiterates in the faith and there is an

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*Translated from "La Crisis de la Educación," "Educación para la Liberación," and "Educación y Misión," Encuentro (Buenos Aires), No. 1 (April, 1972), pp. 8-13. The three papers were presented as a discussion guide during the IV Assembly of the Latin American Evangelical Commission on Christian Education (CELADEC), held at La Molina, Perú, in July, 1971.

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--What does it mean to put into practice education for the development of the whole potential of the human person?
--How can Christian education overcome its separation from the real situation in which people in our countries live? How should Christian education and the real situation be related?
--What significant secular innovations imply a change in the educational task of the Church?

II. Education for Liberation

It is a well-established fact that Latin America lives in a situation of colonialism and dependence that affects its economic, political, social, educational, and religious existence, as well as every other aspect of its life that we can think of. This state of affairs demands a liberation. The recent Assembly of the World Council of Christian Education, in Huampaní, Perú, July, 1971, exhorted Christians to undertake a liberating action. In its Message to the Churches the Assembly said:

> Once more we have experienced how the mission of the Church is that of witnessing to the living God made manifest in Jesus Christ and in every liberating action. . . . Liberation is much more than an idea or an ideal. It is God's work in the world for the elimination of the causes of slavery and for the full realization of a new life which becomes actualized in community, solidarity, respect, and equality, according to the truth revealed in the Gospel.*

If this is true, then it is unquestionable that the elimination of dependence involves liberation. That this should surprise us, whether agreeably or disagreeably, is a new evidence of our bias in reading and interpreting the Scriptures. The theology of creation in Israel sees man as a responsible co-creator of history and of the world (Gen. 1:26-30; 2:8-15; cf. vs. 19-20). Man is the maker of his life and he is responsible for his history.

Liberation has deep biblical roots. To point out the most obvious evidence, it is enough to recall the historic origins of the Hebrew people--the epic of their liberation from Egypt. No one can believe that the Exodus dealt with an interior spiritual liberation, although it included that. The Exodus was a historic liberation from an oppressive reality. The mission of Moses was a concrete political event:

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*"Message to the Churches," World Christian Education (Geneva), Vol. 26, Nos. 3 and 4 (3rd and 4th Quarters, 1971), p. 132.

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*"Message to the Churches," World Christian Education (Geneva), Vol. 25, Nos. 3 and 4 (3rd and 4th Quarters, 1971), p. 127.

"I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey. . . . And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt" (Exodus 3:7-10).

God promises to be present in this liberating action (v. 12). The liberation of the Exodus had serious consequences for the oppressor: the loss of slave labor and of a sizeable market, the death of the first-born, the plunder of his goods, and the defeat of the Egyptian army. At the same time, the liberation was hard for the victors. Ahead lay the desert, uncertainty, a new society, and new enemies, as well as other risks. Subsequent history included the difficult struggle of the Hebrews against the Palestinian tribes (Joshua 11:15 ff.).

Repeatedly the Prophets denounced practices of injustice and oppression. Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, to name the most important ones, incarnated themselves in the historical reality of the people in order to undertake the task of liberation. Jesus took up the prophetic line--denunciation and action--and of his deeds we have as paradigms the proclamation (Luke 4:18) and the praxis (Mark 5:1-20). We have to ask ourselves where the educational task is. The Bible gives us no teaching except that which springs from action.

In this context of human commitment on the one hand and of believing on the other, an educational task that is genuine, authentic, and above all evangelical, can begin. To this commitment José Míguez Bonino refers in relation to theology in Latin America:

> Young theologians . . . have been conscious of this situation. And thus "theologies of revolution" and of "liberation" appear on the scene and attempt to carry over to their field of reflection the revolution that has originated in the field of sociology. It is this conscious and passionate taking of a stance within a concrete problematic situation, analyzed through the medium of social-political instruments and adopted in an ideological option, that characterizes the new Latin American theology.*

Just as theology cannot be done from an abstract and disinterested position, neither is it possible to authenticate evangelical teaching

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"I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey. . . . And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt" (Exodus 3:7-10).

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Especially the Prophets denounced practices of injustice and oppression. Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, to name the most important ones, incorporated elements in the historical reality of the people in order to undertake the task of liberation. Jesus took up the prophetic line--denunciation and action--and at his death he have as paradigm the proclamation (Luke 4:18) and the praxis (Mark 5:1-20). We have to ask ourselves where the educational task is. The Bible gives us no teaching except that which springs from action.

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that does not originate in praxis. To say this in another way, one cannot do education and baptize it as "Christian education" while starting from the rootlessness and alienation of our ecclesiastical communities. It must be done from a Christian existence actively carried on in the historical task of the people. The time is past for Christian education for the church; what is needed is an education in faith of Christians who are in the world. "I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from evil . . . As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world" (John 17: 15, 18).

For our Thinking:

--What elements of the Church are obstacles to the liberating action of Christians? How can they be overcome?
--How can the educational task of our churches in Latin America be made authentic?
--What responsibility does the theology of creation place upon us as Christians in this historic period in Latin America?
--What strategy must Christians adopt to become part of the process of liberation of our peoples?

III. Education and Mission

General education. One of the most serious problems of education today is the institution of schooling. An inversion has occurred: the school that used to be at the service of education has been converted into an end in itself. It is no longer an instrument or means. The point has been reached where education is at the service of the school.

The school has become sacrosanct; its machinery may be adjusted and oiled, but never changed. Each classroom has its priest and novitiates. Argentina, which takes pride in its superior school system, now has a day for the novitiates to honor their Patron Saint (September 11th). There are other days for offerings and oblations that the novitiates owe the priest. The sacredness of the school, like that of the Church, has separated it from the real situation in which people live. The people who can do so, go to the sanctuary and after long, extenuating, and boring years of school liturgy, go out into a real world from which the school has already alienated them. It is thus understandable that in our day voices such as that of Ivan Illich are frankly proposing the end of schooling: "Education must be de-schooled."

Christian education. Almost the same thing can be said about the Church school, with the fortunate exception that attendance is not

obligatory. The problems it faces are similar: the question of separation from the real world, of being a thing in itself, of not preparing people for a life of faith in the world, of turning out graduates, when there are any, who are out of touch with the situation of the people. The Church school is part of a whole--the ecclesiastical institution--that has also inverted its role. The church, that is the assembled meeting of thepeople of God, has ceased to be characterized as a living people, responsible for its own history and for history itself. In pointing to its hierarchy, its buildings, its institutions, its earthly influence, the institutionalized Church has been converted into a power factor (ever since Constantine and the Edict of Milan) that has to be consulted by Western Christian states. The armed forces, banks, industry, organized labor, the farmers, and the Church are powers that interact. The institutionalized Church dares not to lose its influence. The Church needs members and money to maintain itself.

The present structure of the church institution is linked to the power structure and has ceased to be the assembly of the called people. In order to become the church, the Church must be de-institutionalized. A church free from the temptation of power, free of its buildings, free of social influence, a church of poverty, may again become the "light of the world," the "salt of the earth," and the "leaven" of the nations.

With Christian education bound up with ecclesiastical power, in a rich and powerful organization, how can people be educated for their real situation? We are faced with the phenomenal undertaking of having to dismantle the Church to make Christian education an authentic task (let it not use up all our time, energy, and imagination!). Furthermore, we cannot give thought to Christian education without remembering that catechesis is part of the mission of the church. The panorama becomes clearer to us: if it is true that the church is not fulfilling its mission can we believe that Christian education is authentic? The problems that affect the church's instruction are not so perceptible. The underlying infrastructure is out of touch with today's world. The first great temptation would be to dedicate ourselves with passion to reform the church institution, but this would alienate our life anew. Is it possible to be the church of Christ within the institution? Is it not wiser to integrate the church into the infrastructure of the society of the poor? The priestly service, without a church building, in the shanty towns and the New Parish in Lanús in the midst of 130,000 outcastes of industrial society are a challenge to our imagination.

Perhaps pilot projects in several places in Latin America should be proposed in order to try out a new strategy and achieve a new presence of the body of Christ among men.

For our Thinking:

--What implications do Christians face in calling for a Church of poverty? What will be the personal, institutional, and social costs?
--What meaning does the revolutionary process of our people have for the mission of the Church in Latin America?
--What specific tasks can be proposed for pilot projects?
--What are the elements that make the church an ecclesiastical institution? How can the church be de-institutionalized?
--What will be the priorities in carrying out an authentic Christian education in a different social infrastructure?
--How can theological education contribute to a new Christian Education in Latin America?

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